Of Locke's Presence

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Abstract

This article is about Locke's presence in politics. In this context the prevailing understanding is that the heyday of Locke's presence is dated to the turn of 1670s and 1680s. This interpretation was launched by Peter Laslett in 1960 in the "Introduction" to his critical edition of Locke's *Two Treatises*. Today this understanding directs scholars' efforts in Locke studies; it is a major component of the prevailing Locke-paradigm. Because of this, challenges to the Laslettian understanding merit especial attention. To this effect is e.g. Mark Knights's recent paper (2011) in which his objective is to contribute to the development of an alternative understanding of Locke's presence in politics. This article critically reviews Knights's study. I ask in what sense his contribution is a challenge to the Laslettian paradigm. It will be argued that Knights's proposition is paradoxical, and as such opens us a perspective to further Locke studies.

Keywords

Locke, Laslett, Knights, *Two Treatises* edition.

Introduction

In the post World War II era Locke studies have gone through a dramatic transformation. The understanding of Locke, his major political work *The Two Treatises of Government* (1690) and its context have been given new contents. The changes originate in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s were a period of bewilderment and the taking shape of first studies rising to the status of exemplary actualizations of the new paradigm (e.g. Dunn 1969).

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The 1980s were already a period of stabilization of the new Locke paradigm. The traditional Locke-understanding was pushed into the margins of scholarship devoid of notable significance for the development of Locke scholarship (Ashcraft 1987, 298). This, and the concomitant superseding of the traditional research approach by a new one touched deeply the self-understanding of Locke scholars (see e.g. Ashcraft 1987, 298-305).

This transformation process was not unanimous; besides critical comments, doubts were expressed all along the process (see Goldie 1999). This was the case especially with the new understanding of the context to which Locke's book originally belonged. Although the debate on when exactly Locke composed his book continued also in the 1980s and 1990s (esp. Ashcraft 1987), it was possible for Mark Goldie to write in 1999, that "nobody has seriously challenged the new understanding" (Goldie 1999, xxi).

Today, the situation in Locke studies is basically the same. Scholarship is fundamentally affected and directed by the new paradigm established in the 1960s. At the same time important critical interventions are common (e.g. Waldron 2002). However, the leaving aside of the new paradigm is not anymore meaningful, perhaps not even possible. It must be taken into account. "The tide has shifted in favor of the new orthodoxy", as Richard Ashcraft (1987, 2) wrote with some resignation in his words.

Ashcraft's remark is basically valid even today. Now, however, we must consider it with some new emphasis. In the late 1980s the question was still of the acceptability of the new paradigm, especially of its original context of composition. Also this was manifested in what Ashcraft, one of the major protagonists in the struggle, wrote: "If the latter [the new paradigm, T.T.] has not yet scored a complete triumph, it has seriously undermined the foundations of the older intellectual structure" (*ibid*., 2).

The struggle between the old and new paradigm was not yet definitively solved. It was still waged as an exchange of opinion concerning the textual fit of the new paradigm and the *Two Treatises* and other materials (Ashcraft 1987, 286-97). Today the situation is different; the new paradigm is an established one, an acknowledged fact; in regard to the old paradigm, it has "scored a complete triumph". In Locke studies this is reflected in that the question is now of the validity of the actualizations of the new paradigm, i.e., of the relation between scholars' propositions and the new paradigm. References to textual evidence from the *Two Treatises* are not any more as decisive as still in the mid-1980s. Decisive is now the scholars' capacity to offer and solve new problems meaning further actualization of the paradigm (Verronen 1986, 72). This is important also in regard to efforts to create alternatives to the established paradigm. They indicate conscious challenging of the paradigm.

The Problem

Studies explicitly proposing alternative interpretations to the paradigmatic ones enjoy especial interest and merit attention. They make possible e.g. the consideration of the state of the established paradigm; is the paradigm still the starting-point of actualizations, or is it somehow ridden by anomalies, perhaps even beset by crisis manifested e.g. in the questioning of the paradigm's basic commitments.

A recent Locke study to this effect is e.g. Mark Knights's article "John Locke and Post-Revolutionary Politics: Electoral Reform and the Franchise" (Knights 2011). In this interesting study Knights explicitly challenges a major aspect of the established paradigm. The question is of Locke's political presence, its mode and proper context in English politics. In these regards Knights explicitly seeks for an alternative to the paradigmatic understandings.

In this article, I consider Knights's proposition concerning Locke's presence in English politics. Is Knights proposition really an alternative to the paradigmatic notion? If it is, in which sense of the word? Does he propose a fundamentally new understanding of Locke's presence, or is he proposing an alternative in some lesser sense of the word? I argue that Knights's proposition is paradoxical, and as such opens us a perspective to further Locke studies.

In the following sections I first discuss three aspects of fundamental importance to the received Locke-paradigm. They derive from Peter Laslett's work. In the fourth section I discuss Knights's challenge, his alternative proposition concerning Locke's presence in English politics. I also look into the scholarly background to his proposition. In the fifth section I ask what Knights's proposition is in the perspective of the received, basically Laslettian paradigm. The study ends with a conclusion.

Laslett's Achievement

In Locke studies Peter Laslett's critical edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1960) is a major achievement, an indisputable turning-point. In comparison to the traditional politico-philosophical understanding (see e.g. Gough 1950), paradigmatic in the 1960s, his Locke is an amazing, radically new Locke. The politico-philosophical Locke had been a major figure in the "great texts" canon of Western political thought running through centuries from Plato and Aristotle onwards to Bodin, Hobbes and Locke up to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures, Bentham and J. S. Mill, for instance.

In this canon Locke's *Two Treatises* had not only been the politico-philosophical justification of the Glorious Revolution but also of the major out-come emanating from this event, the modern liberal state. In the traditional understanding, Locke had provided this state with a classical liberal justification. Natural rights, consent, and individualism, to name but a few, had been backbone concepts in this theory of the modern state (e.g. Macpherson 1962; Gough 1950).

In Laslett's "Introduction" to the critical edition, the site of his revolutionary interpretation, the readers were provided with an altogether different Locke (see Turkka 2004). Of this Locke but few symptoms had been heard or seen before the book's publication. These symptoms had been, moreover, Laslett's own works. In two articles published in 1956 (1956a; 1956b) Laslett had provided the readers the same contents, questioning in one important point the traditional understanding. The traditional case supposing that Locke's book "belongs wholly and indissolubly to 1688, the year of Glorious Revolution" was, he had claimed, "quite untrue" (1956a, 41; 1956b, vii). This was an outrageous statement, anticipating what his soon to be published edition would mean. It was clear that the scholarly community was poorly prepared for the changes that would come along with the edition.

Laslett's new interpretation did not, however, come out of thin air. Roughly at the same time important re-evaluations of Locke's thinking and significance were underway also in the United States, in the works of Caroline Robbins, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood (see Salhope 1972). What is more important in this context is, however, that Laslett's interpretation was supported by significant new materials found in private and university archives and libraries. In regard to these materials, Laslett was in some cases not only the first scholar to benefit from them but their arranger for public use, too. This was the case with Locke's library (Harrington and Laslett 1965; Laslett 1956a, 46-51). Therefore, as a Locke scholar Laslett was in fact in a head start position. Laslett knew his Locke better than anyone else; the new Locke was really of his making.

As a consequence, the book's publication made it almost necessary for other Locke scholars to carefully re-consider their established conceptions. In some cases, this resulted even in quite a rapid step back from traditionally cherished views. How long the traditional views had been maintained, or how remarkable a position they had enjoyed in Locke studies, seemed in some cases not to matter much (see Waldron 2002, 50). A de facto withdrawal from the trade to the margins of scholarship was also an option in this situation.

The other side of these reactions was that the publication of Laslett's critical edition offered a new generation of scholars the possibility to rapidly occupy an influential position in the field, as was the case e.g. with John Dunn (1969).

Important was also that in the "Introduction" Laslett presented even his most amazing findings point-blank. He did not conceal his mind. This was to the effect that his revolutionary interpretations were in most cases approachable to all, i.e., not only to Locke scholars but to students and the general public, too.

When we also take into account that the previous publication of the *Two Treatises* as a whole had taken place in 1924 (Carpenter edition), we may understand that Laslett's interpretation was almost "predestinated" to replace the traditional, basically liberal Locke-paradigm, and to become a new paradigm in the field. This was because of several re-interpretations. Such was first what Laslett claimed to be Locke's role in the book. The same applied, secondly, to what Laslett found the *Two Treatises* to be about. The third claim concerned the context to which Locke's book originally belonged. These three findings were, among several others, of paradigmatic importance for Laslett's interpretation, including for its understanding of Locke's *presence* in English politics.

The first and perhaps the most fundamental of Laslett's revolutionary interpretations was his claim about the character of the *Two Treatises*. In Laslett's view (1967, 46) the book was not a piece of political philosophy written in order to justify theoretically the 1688 Revolution. This view was, as we have already seen, 'quite untrue' (Laslett 1956a, 41). This it was notwithstanding the fact that it was then not only the prevailing but the unchallenged understanding.

Instead, Locke's book was an Exclusion tract. Originally, Locke had written the book in order to advance the political fortunes of Lord Shaftesbury, his patron (Laslett 1967, 61). Shaftesbury's problems and aspirations were Locke's problems and aspirations, too. This applied also to the *Two Treatises*; the *Treatises* were Locke's tool for promoting Shaftesbury's interests in the evolving constitutional crisis at the turn of 1670s and 1680s (*ibid.*). Thus, instead of being a study in political philosophy, the book was a political tract whose proper context was the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681). It was this context to which Locke scholars had now to direct their attention if they were to properly understand the origins of the *Two Treatises* and its argument. They had to study the book as a call for revolution to be made, not as a theoretical justification of a revolution already made (Laslett 1967, 47).

These findings had an important consequence also in regard to how scholars should now understand Locke. Also in this context, Laslett's claims demanded giving up almost three hundred years of received wisdom. It was not any more justified to see Locke as a political philosopher, not at any rate in the *Two Treatises*. Locke had to be rediscovered; if he was not a political philosopher, he had to be something else.

Laslett's solution to the question was logical and simple. Locke, the writer of a political tract was a political activist, a political agent in the service of a major politician of the day (Laslett 1967, 36). This was an amazing conclusion loaded however with strong explanatory power. It was no wonder any more why the *Two Treatises* was said to be confusing (Macpherson, 1962, 194) or two hundred unreadable pages (Laslett 1967, 61). Laslett's Locke was really a new Locke.

Knights's Alternative

In his article "John Locke and Post-Revolutionary Politics: Electoral Reform and the Franchise", Mark Knights discusses Locke's political activities in the context of the 1690s. As a background to his study Knights refers (2011, 41) to the "profound change" which has taken place in the understanding of Locke's political ideas and importance in the last forty years. In this context Knights writes that the *Two Treatises* was once seen as the theoretical justification of the Glorious Revolution. Today, however, Locke's book is situated at the turn of the 1670s and 1680s (*ibid*.). The "profound change" discussed by Knights involves the re-dating of the *Two Treatises* to a ten years earlier moment in English politics than what had been supposed before the profound scholarly transformation.

According to Knights, this re-dating is part of a fundamental re-evaluation of Locke's presence in English politics. It comprises also changes in the understanding of Locke's book and its impact. This re-evaluation he summarizes by the following quotation of Mark Goldie's (1991, xxi) study: "Where Locke was once assumed to be the ineluctable fount of political wisdom, he has now come to have an elusive and fugitive presence" (Knights 2011, 41).

Locke with a lasting presence has been transformed into a Locke with momentary presence. His message has lost the aura of lasting wisdom; it is but elusive now. As Goldie (1999, xxi) writes, Locke has lost his "shaping presence", he is not any more the impetus for politics he once was. These changes in Locke's presence Knights locates to one single study, Peter Laslett's critical edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. However, for Knights Laslett is not the sole responsible for the dramatic change in Locke's presence. Laslett's famous edition is but the 'key turning point' (2011, 41). John Kenyon, Martyn P. Thompson, Harry Dickinson, Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock have also made important contributions to the change in Locke's presence. They have all "questioned or minimized the influence that Locke's political ideology had, both at the time of its publication and throughout much of the eighteenth century" (*ibid*.). They have all enlarged the influence of Laslett's fundamental interpretations. The overall impact of these scholars for

Knights is clear. Locke's political influence after the 1688 Revolution is today slight (2011, 41-2).

Of his own position to the "profound change" in Locke's presence Knights writes (2011, 42) that it is critical. Instead of carrying on the marginalization of Locke's presence, his objective in the article is to enlarge our knowledge of Locke's post-revolutionary activities. In this regard he says that he shares the position of Mark Goldie, Richard Ashcraft, M. M. Goldsmith, and Michael Zuckert who have all sought, on their own ways, to develop an alternative to the basically Laslettian interpretation.

Goldie, Ashcraft and Goldsmith have concentrated on the pre-revolutionary Locke and the "textual impact of his work" (2011, 42). Of Zuckert he writes (*ibid.*) that he has tried to link Locke's work to the commonwealthsmen's influence in America. The search for an alternative understanding of Locke's presence in politics is thus common to a number of well-known scholars with, however, partly divergent scholarly profiles and research agendas. The search for an alternative has also an English and American dimension.

Of his own contribution to the common effort Knights writes that he makes it by studying Locke's position on the franchise reform (2011, 42). This he regards as one of the "thorniest issues in Lockean scholarship". It is thorny because in his published writings Locke did not make his opinion on this important matter explicitly clear (Knights 2011, 42-3).

In this context Knights remarks (2011, 43) that Locke's stance must not be sought from his published writings alone. There are other materials, too. The consideration only of the published texts would not do justice to how Locke and his friends, the 'college', were involved in politics. In the 1690s they "played an active and highly visible role in lobbying, policy-development and drafting legislation" (*ibid.*). Materials emanating from these activities, although mostly non-public, offer an additional perspective to Locke's opinions and activities. In fact, Knights means that these unpublished materials must be taken into account if we are properly to understand Locke's stance on the franchise reform. Locke's published writings offer but a one-sided perspective to his political activities.

In his article Knights puts special emphasis on a draft bill found among the papers of Edward Clarke who was "one of Locke's closest allies" (*ibid.*). What makes this draft bill especially important in this context is, however, that it had been annotated by Locke (*ibid.*). This gives Knights reason to believe that the document sheds light on both Locke's and his friend's views. As he writes (2011, 43), the bill shows a "very clear preference for the type of franchise that both men wanted to prevail". However, Knights maintains that the draft bill illuminates the "college's" common position, not only that of Locke's and Clarke's; the bill is the "college's electoral bill" (2011, 43).

Of the motive behind the draft bill Knights writes (2011, 43) that Clarke and Locke were concerned "about the possibility of a corrupt legislature". Locke had discussed this possibility in the *Second Treatise* (§§ 157 and 216) where he had outlined "how the legislature could be perverted" (Knights 2011, 43). He had pointed out two possibilities.

One was the disparity between the socio-economic circumstances and the franchise. The other was the alteration of the "'ways of Election' contrary to the common interest of the People" (*ibid*.). Knights writes that "[t]he latter were the issues that the draft bill sought to address" (*ibid*.). As a consequence, the bill is for Knights not only the college's bill. It was also a possibility for Locke "to try to put theory in practice in a climate of reform" (Knights 2011, 44). Thus, Locke's presence in English politics in the 1690s was not only practical. At least in the franchise reform case, Locke's presence was also theoretically informed. Knights's references to the *Two Treatises* show the slight extent to which this was the case.

The Achievement and the Alternative Considered Together

Knights finds Locke's and Clarke's views in the draft bill important also for two other reasons. The first is that their opinions were not unique. They reflected Country or "true" Whig opinions. For Knights this is noteworthy because in the 1690s Locke and Clarke held government offices. They were Court Whigs, who in public were often "caricatured as having sold out". (Knights 2011, 45). The consideration of the draft bill has now shown, however, that also after the 1688 Revolution and their taking government office, they had retained their Country Whig principles, including the reform of Parliament. As a result, the college, often epitomized by Locke's contemporaries as the Modern or Court Whigs, emerges in the draft bill "as a bridge between a number of different strands of Whiggery at both personal and policy level" (Knights 2011, 45).

Moreover, the college's presence in politics was not marginal; in fact it was situated in the focus of political development. To this effect was also that "many in the 1690s", Knights writes (2011, 45), "saw them as continuing a commonwealth tradition".

In Knights's view (2011, 41) these findings are intrinsically important. They show e.g. that what Locke and Clarke were in ideological terms was not unequivocally clear. They also indicate how the study of the post-revolutionary Locke is "in many ways just as interesting" as "the study of pre-revolutionary Locke and the gestation of the *Two Treatises*" (ibid.). In this context Knights writes (2011, 44) that most scholarly activity has centered on the latter. He finds this "natural" (*ibid*.). Several aspects manifest what this means.

Firstly, Knights's reference to the "gestation of the *Two Treatises*" as a natural object of study is important. It refers to Knights attitude towards the previous forty years of Locke scholarship, and its most important single characteristic. This is the revision of Locke, his book, and its proper context. In other words, the question is of Locke's presence. As we have seen, it has gone through a thorough transformation. Now the new understanding forms the mainstream in Locke studies. Accepted problems and approaches emanate from it. The study of this mainstream is now natural, paradigmatic. Knights recognizes this situation.

At the same time, secondly, he encourages the study of Locke in the context of the 1690s. To this purpose he refers to a vast collection of unpublished materials in the Clarke collection (2011, 45). Its perusal would shed more light on Locke's presence in English politics in the post-revolutionary England. However, this study would be complementary to the paradigmatic one; it would only add to our knowledge of Locke's presence in politics.

Besides this, Knights has also another motive for the study of Locke's presence in the context of the 1690s; the study of the vast Clarke collection would back up the alternative he seeks for the Laslettian understanding of Locke's presence. His alternative would strengthen. This study would, however, be only of secondary significance. Paradigmatic study concentrates on the gestation period of Locke's *Two Treatises*, the turn of the 1670s and the 1680s. This shows how Knight's relation to the basically Laslettian paradigm is complicated. There are differences between his and Laslett's ideas. In the paradigm, Locke's presence is confined, it is dated only to the turn of 1670s and 1680s. In other contexts, Locke's presence is left open, for tactical (Pocock 1975, 424) or other reasons.

Knights's "comrades-in-arms" –Ashcraft, Goldie, Goldsmith and Zuckert– have, however, argued that Locke indeed had a presence in pre-revolution England. His own contribution in the article shows that the same applies to the 1690s. Thus, there seem to be good reasons to believe that Locke did have a more lasting presence in politics than what the Laslettian position implicates. This notwithstanding, Knights cannot do anything but to admit that his Locke is but of secondary importance. Paradigmatic interpretations enjoy primacy. Knights finds also this natural.

The relation between the paradigm and Knights's alternative is even more complicated. As we have seen, both Laslett and Knights find Locke a political activist. Likewise, the *Two Treatises* is for both a political tract. Moreover, in both interpretations the book is not any more the source of lasting political wisdom. The time when this book was the great impetus for politics is far in the past, in the pre-Laslettian world of political philosophy and the modern liberal state. The list of similarities could be continued and concretized.

Conclusion

Of the previous discussion we may find that between Laslett's and Knights's opinions on Locke's presence, similarities and dissimilarities prevail. How should we now understand this relation? Especially, how should we now find Knights's claim that his proposition is an alternative to the basically Laslettian paradigm?

In this context we have two possibilities. The first one is that we stress either similarities or dissimilarities between the understandings. This is Knights approach; his stress is on the dissimilarities. The other possibility is that we find similarities and dissimilarities essential for the relation. This is my approach. I argue that both understandings mean basically the same. Both indicate the detachment of the modern state from its bond to Locke's political philosophy in the *Two Treatises*. Compatibility prevails between the Laslettian paradigm and Knights's understanding. What compatibility in fact means in this present case, merits closer attention.

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